Metaphor and Translation

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We may not notice that metaphor and translation have some kind of a hidden relationship with one another until we explore the linguistic and conceptual roots of these words. That relationship or affinity is brought home in the German word for translation – *übersetzen* – which translates the Latin *translatio* and, through it, the Greek word *metapherein*, that is, metaphor.[1] Literally, *übersetzen*, like *metapherein*, means to carry something across, and in the case of translation, something is carried over from one language to another; hence to translate. Metaphor, on the other hand, indicates a similar act of transference (*Übertragung*), as it is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase signifying one thing is used in place of another to suggest some degree of likeness or equivalence. In the use of a metaphor, the connotative semantic value is carried over from one term to another insofar as the two terms can be linked together by connotation, some semantic similarity or conceptual affinity. When we think about the etymologies of these words, we may realize that both metaphor and translation operate in a similar manner, for both are transference of semantic values from one term to another, or from a term in one language to a similar term in a different language. I would argue that to recognize the *modus operandi* of metaphor and translation as acts of transference can also help us understand the nature of translation and thereby to clarify the often-debated issue of translatability or, perhaps more significantly, untranslatability, particularly in intercultural studies. In this essay, I shall discuss these issues by referring to texts in the Chinese tradition and texts of European literature, that is to say, texts that are radically different and thought by some as incommensurable. Such a deliberate choice of radically different texts purports to challenge the argument of untranslatability and to illustrate the point I try to make about translation as an act of intercultural communication, in which what is sought and can be reasonably achieved is some degree of equivalence, but not total identity.

Metaphor as Transference

The use of a metaphor can be very effective in conveying a complex idea as it displaces that idea and all its abstractness with a concrete image in a graphic and memorable form. That is why metaphorical expressions are important for poetry as a particular form of language, in which concrete images are far more prevalent than abstract notions. That is also the reason why Roman Jakobson chose metaphor to characterize the poetic or aesthetic function of language.[2]

[1] See Paul de Man: "The Epistemology of Metaphor", in: *On Metaphor*, ed. by Sheldon Sacks, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ²1979, 15.
[2] See Roman Jakobson: "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles", in: *Critical Theory since Plato* [1971], ed. by Hazard Adams, rev. ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, 1041–1044.

Let me illustrate the point by quoting some lines from Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken":

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference.[3]

Here the poet speaks of choosing a road in a wood, but as readers, we understand him as speaking of dealing with options or alternatives in life, because we typically think of a poem as a structure of symbolic meanings, as a text that means more than what it literally says. In this poem, then, the image of taking or not taking a particular road is a metaphorical way of saying that once we make a choice and decision in life, that choice will have irreversible consequences for all subsequent choices available to us. The abstract idea of making choices in life thus comes out clearly in the concrete and vivid image of taking a crucial step at a crossroads. Facing the dilemma of diverging roads or forking paths is in fact a recurrent literary motif, a metaphor of the necessity and challenge of making choices.

In Western literature, "the choice of Heracles" is probably the earliest example of such a literary motif, "the first true personification allegory in the West".[4] According to Xenophon, the story was written by the fifth-century B.C. sophist Prodicus, and Socrates recounted that story in a dialogue when he was discussing the rigorous training of virtue and the temptation of vice. "Wickedness can be had in abundance easily: smooth is the road and very nigh she dwells", says Socrates. "But in front of virtue the gods immortal have put sweat: long and steep is the path to her and rough at first; but when you reach the top, then at length the road is easy, hard though it was."[5] It is in this context that Socrates mentioned Prodicus' story and described Heracles as "passing from boyhood to youth's estate", that the young hero "went out into a quiet place, and sat pondering which road to take", upon which two beautiful women, personifications of virtue and vice, approached him and offered him the choice of different roads.[6] From Prodicus and Xenophon to a well-known essay by Joseph Addison in the *Tatler journal*, to Händel's musical interlude, and to numerous modern variations and children's stories, the 'Choice of Heracles' has been a popular story in the West, as it effectively dramatizes the anxiety of choice – not only choice of a moral character, but also the anxiety of knowing that once a choice is made, possibilities offered by other choices are closed or lost. Only in the surreal world of a fantastic story like Borges' "Garden of Forking Paths" can all the imaginary possibilities be kept simultaneously open, but to have all choices taken, just like to have all paths followed, is so mind-boggling that the imaginary "garden of forking

[3] Robert Frost: "The Road Not Taken" [1916], in: *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, New York: The Library of America, [5]1995, 103.
[4] Jon Whitman: *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, 22.
[5] Xenophon [born 445 B.C.]: *Memorabilia*, II.i.20, trans. Edgar Cardew Marchant, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [9]1997 [1923] (Loeb Classical Library 168), 93.
[6] Op. cit., II.i.21, 95.

paths" becomes a total mystery, "an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts", "a labyrinth of symbols", possible only in the pages of a fantastic tale.[7] In real life, the anxiety of choice is truly great because temporality and life itself are experienced as linear and irreversible, and once you take the decisive step and move forward, it would be impossible to return to the original moment or condition.

In great literature that holds a mirror up to nature, temporality carries with it the same burden of choice as tragic consequences. In commenting on *Macbeth* as a play about prophesy and temporal consequences, Frank Kermode remarks that "Nothing in time can, in that sense be *done*, freed of consequence or equivocal aspects. Prophecy by its very forms admits this, and so do plots. It is a truism confirmed later by Lady Macbeth: 'What's done cannot be undone'. The act is not an end".[8] We can cite many more examples of the same literary motif or conceptual metaphor because facing a crossroads happens to be one of the most common metaphors with which we think about challenges, possibilities, and decision-makings in life. "Basic conceptual metaphors are part of the common conceptual apparatus shared by members of a culture", as George Lakoff and Mark Turner argue. "We usually understand them in terms of common experiences."[9] I would emphasize the word "common", because here both the structure of the domain to be understood, – i.e., making choices in life, and the domain in terms of which we understand it, i.e., facing a crossroads, – are common experiences shared not just by members of one culture, but people across cultures. That is to say, the basic conceptual metaphor of facing a crossroads can be found not just in Western literature and culture, but also in the East across different literatures and cultures.

In the Chinese tradition, we have the famous image of the philosopher Yang Zhu (300 B.C.) who "wept when he saw bifurcating roads that could lead to either south or north".[10] The striking image of a wise man weeping at a crossroads certainly dramatizes the anxiety of making difficult choices, and this image becomes a recurrent one often alluded to in Chinese literature. For example, the great Tang poet Li Bo (701–762) writes:

> How difficult the journey, how difficult and hard!
> Numerous are crossroads, but where's my way ahead?
> Yet time will come when the wind will break the waves,
> And I – I'll hoist the sails and set off to the sea![11]

Many commentators read the difficult journey as a metaphor for the difficult and treacherous situations the poet faced in social and political life, which is surely part of the textual

[7] Jorge Luis Borges: "The Garden of Forking Paths" [span. 1941], trans. D. A. Yates, in: *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, New York: Modern Library, 1983 [1962], 24–25.

[8] Frank Kermode: *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 86.

[9] George Lakoff and Mark Turner: *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 51.

[10] He Ning何寧, *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 [*Huainanzi with Collected Annotations*], 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1998), 3:1230
[All translations from the Chinese are mine].

[11] Li Bo李白: *Xing lu nan* 行路難 (Difficult Journey), in: *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集 (Complete Works of Li Bai), 3 vols., ed. by Wang Qi 王琦, Beijing: Zhonghua, 1977, 1:189.

meaning. The journey is difficult, however, not just because roads are treacherous, but also because there are numerous crossroads that make choices and decision-making risky and perilous. The idea here is not so different from the one in Robert Frost's poem quoted above. This and the other classical Chinese texts we shall discuss later have no connection with texts in the West either by contact or by influence, but the very non-connectedness is in itself a powerful testimony to the sharedness of basic human experiences and the common structure of conceptualizing those experiences metaphorically across cultures and cultural differences.

On the conceptual level, the above quotations from different literary works are all variations of the same basic metaphor that replaces the concept of making choices in life with one of the most common and concrete human experiences – that of facing a crossroads. In using such basic conceptual metaphors, we have the benefit of seeing complex ideas unfold in concrete and easily comprehensible images, but at the same time, we must also realize the difference between the metaphor and the idea it symbolically represents. Strictly speaking, making a choice is not facing a crossroads or taking a step forward on the road. Metaphor, in other words, does not tell us directly what it is only suggesting indirectly. As Northrop Frye says:

> Thus the metaphor turns its back on ordinary descriptive meaning, and presents a structure which literally is ironic and paradoxical. In ordinary descriptive meaning, if A is B then B is A, and all we have really said is that A is itself. In the metaphor two things are identified while each retains its own form. Thus if we say „the hero was a lion" we identify the hero *with* the lion, while at the same time both the hero and the lion are identified *as* themselves.[12]

Frye sees metaphor as almost the prerogative of poets, but a major point Lakoff and Turner make is that basic conceptual metaphors are everywhere in language, in ordinary as well as the poetic usage of language, and therefore great poetry is a whole lot closer to our daily language than we may have realized. "The basic metaphors are not creations of poets", Lakoff and Turner argue; "rather, it is the masterful way in which poets extend, compose, and compress them that we find poetic."[13] There are only a small number of basic conceptual metaphors in any given language, but great poets can make innovative variations of such basic metaphors and give us new and unforgettable expressions. A metaphor, as Aristotle observes, is "the application [to something] of a name belonging to something else […] according to analogy".[14] Some analogies are obvious, some are not, and poets are especially capable of discerning the unexpected analogy or likeness between two names forming a metaphorical relation. So Frye is absolutely right in emphasizing the poetic quality of extraordinary metaphors, for Aristotle also held that "to make metaphors well is to observe what is like [something else]", and that the capability of sharp observation, that inborn capability that "cannot be acquired from someone else",

[12] Northrop Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 123.
[13] Lakoff/Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 54.
[14] Aristotle [384–322 B.C.]: *Poetics* 57b7, trans. Richard Janko, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987, 28.

is "an indication of genius".[15] In other words, we all use metaphors, but great poetic metaphors are very special, almost unique, indicative of the talents of a literary genius.

The not so obvious analogy or likeness between the tenor and the vehicle of a metaphorical expression makes a poetic metaphor striking and attractive, but the two names connected by the metaphor are also remarkably different, thus confirming the point Frye makes, i.e., that metaphor is not strictly logical, that in a metaphorical expression the two terms identified *with* one another remain separate *as* themselves. For all the poetic vividness and brilliance of the analogy, making a choice is not taking a step at a crossroads after all. The two terms, choice and crossroads, domain A and domain B, are not and cannot be really identical. In fact, the brilliance of a poetic metaphor largely depends on the discrepancy between the two domains, for the pleasure of a poetic metaphor lies in the revelation of brilliant, but totally unexpected connections between two domains that are otherwise radically different.

Here perhaps the concept of transference in psychoanalysis may offer some additional help for our understanding of the way metaphor works. Freud speaks of the "distortion through transference", for he defines transference as a patient's strong resistance to the doctor's treatment by distorting their interpersonal relationship and making "the object of his emotional impulses coincide with the doctor".[16] According to Freud, all root causes of a patient's neurosis are deeply hidden in the unconscious and are erotic in nature, and these unconscious impulses manifest themselves not "in the way the treatment desires them to be, but endeavour to reproduce themselves in accordance with the timelessness of the unconscious and its capacity for hallucination".[17] To put it simply, transference in psychoanalysis indicates a case of misidentification, a patient's projection of his or her unconscious and ultimately erotic impulses onto the doctor who is not the person to whom those impulses were initially intended. In this sense, then, the domain A and the domain B, the original object of the patient's impulses and the analyst, are not at all identical, though under the circumstances of a therapeutic analytic session, the patient will always find some similarities and affinities between the two.

In the light of transference as Freud discussed, then, we may understand that what links the two domains together in a metaphor can only be partial similarity or equivalence, not total identity. Metaphor is always transference of one term to cover another, but it only covers part of the semantic field of the second term, perhaps an essential and important part, but only a part nonetheless. It always makes a part to stand for the whole. Giambattista Vico characterizes the nature of metaphor as just such a partial coverage or overlapping based on a sort of poetic logic. "Synecdoche became metaphor", says Vico, "when people raised particulars to universals or united parts to form wholes."[18] Following Vico, Ernst Cassirer puts it even more clearly. In logical conceptualization, there is a

[15] Op. cit., 59a7, 32.

[16] Sigmund Freud: "The Dynamics of Transference", trans. under the general editorship of James Strachey, in vol. XII (1911–1913) of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1958, 104.

[17] Op. cit., 108.

[18] Giambattista Vico: *New Science* [ital. 1725], trans. David Marsh, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999, 161 (para. 407).

tendency of "concentric expansion over ever-widening spheres of perception and conception", that is to say, making ever more careful and minute distinctions from genus to species, from the whole to the parts.[19] In mythico-linguistic thought, however, "exactly the opposite tendency prevails. Every part of a whole is the whole itself; every specimen is equivalent to the entire species", says Cassirer with regard to the nature of metaphor. And this, in effect, is "the principle which might be called the basic principle of verbal as well as mythic 'metaphor' – the principle of *pars pro toto*".[20] In rain-making rituals, for example, water is sprinkled on the ground or poured on red hot stones where it is evaporated with hissing noise, in both rituals, says Cassirer, their true magical sense lies in the fact that "the rain is not just represented, but is felt to be really present in each drop of water".[21] The same principle of *pars pro toto* can be applied to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are symbolically identified with Christ's body and blood. But a drop of water is not really rain, and the ritual biscuit and wine can only symbolically represent Christ. In reality, the part is not the same as the whole, and there is always a difference or disparity between the idea or object and its metaphorical displacement. As Frye has reminded us, metaphor joins two terms together, but the two terms remain separate as themselves.

The study of metaphorical formulation is not just an achievement in Western scholarship. In modern Chinese scholarship, the erudite scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) has developed a similar principle of the formation of metaphors based on his reading of Chinese classics and a great number of European texts. He calls it the principle of the "two handles and multiple sides of metaphors". What this means is that a metaphor may have either a positive or a negative connotation, can be approached from different angles, and may carry a multiplicity of meanings. It is so because a metaphor only partially overlaps with what it symbolically signifies. For instance, the reflection of the moon in water is a fairly common image used metaphorically in Buddhist texts as well as in Chinese literary works. As a metaphor, the moon reflected in water may carry a positive meaning to suggest the intangible mystery of the ultimate truth or Way, something delicately beautiful and difficult to reach; but it may also have a negative meaning to imply the vanity of vanities, the futility or emptiness of the ephemeral world. Qian Zhongshu explains such a multiplicity of meanings by looking at the basic relationship between the two terms in a metaphorical formulation, and locates the origin of such multiplicity in the multiple natures, capabilities, functions and effects of things themselves and a metaphor's different intended uses. He writes:

> Metaphors all have two handles and many sides. Things are all one to themselves, but they are not limited to having but one nature and one capability, nor are they restricted to producing but one function or one effect. Because of the different intentions or perspectives of their users, metaphors may have very different *significata* even if their *denotatum* is the

[19] Ernst Cassirer: *Language and Myth* [germ. 1925] trans. Susanne K. Langer, New York: Dover, 1953 [1946], 90.
[20] Op. cit., 92.
[21] Op. cit., 93.

> same. Therefore the image of an object can stand alone and yet respond to a multiplicity of situations, constant to itself while changing in transformation.[22]

As Qian Zhongshu points out, translators of Buddhist texts in China had long realized the multiple functions of metaphors. Fa Yun (1086–1158), a Buddhist monk in the Southern Song dynasty, has made some interesting remarks on metaphor and translation. He points to the multiple sides of metaphors by raising such rhetorical questions: "When snow-capped mountains are made a metaphor for elephants, who can blame them for lacking tails and trunks? When the full moon is made a metaphor for the human face, how can one expect it to have eyes and eyebrows?" Qian quoted some lines from Christiana Rossetti's poem "Sing-song": "A pin has a head, but no hair; / A clock has a face, but no mouth there; / Needles have eyes, but they cannot see", etc., and he comments that these lines and Fa Yun's rhetorical questions "are words that speak of the same mind".[23] Indeed, when we speak of the face of a clock or the moon as a face, we are drawing an analogy between a round and flat shape and a human face, but ignoring all the other details that do not overlap or fit in. The point is, again, that metaphor is only a partial displacement of that which is being expressed metaphorically. To say that making a choice is like facing a crossroads is not to identify choice with crossroads completely, but to suggest some similar attributes or qualities between the two domains. What we appreciate in a metaphor is thus not total identity, but equivalence, and good metaphors are always capable of showing us hidden similarities of seemingly unrelated things in a surprising and sudden revelation, a sort of poetic epiphany that teaches us a new way of looking, a whole new perspective from which we may discern the secret connections of things in a symbolic universe. Metaphors are bridges across which we see the connections and affinities of different things and diverse objects.

The Problem of (Un)Translatability

Translation, the act that turns the alien and unintelligible into the familiar and knowable, is also a metaphorical bridge and has always served as the indispensable mediation between the vast unknown world and whatever is our claim to knowledge. This is so because much of what we know beyond our limited direct experience we owe to translation, both in the narrow sense of renderings from foreign sources and in the broad sense of understanding. As transference, however, translation always entails some sort of transformation, modification, and change. In that sense, then, nothing is beyond or outside the mediation of translation, for everyone, everything changes, and language, as George Steiner argues, offers a linguistic model of all changes, "the most salient model of Heraclitean flux".[24] Since language is always changing in time, understanding language is also always a hermeneutic process, an act of internal translation; so much so that our effort to understand language, or simply our effort at understanding, is already translation. Much of our

[22] Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書: *Guan zhui bian* 管錐編 (*Pipe-Awl Chapters*), Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979, 39.
[23] Op. cit., 41.
[24] George Steiner: *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, 18.

culture is transmitted through just such a process: "In short, the existence of art and literature, the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of internal translation. It is no overstatement to say that we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time."[25] Here translation is of course understood in a broad sense, but it is so because translation in the narrow sense is exemplary of all the intellectual activities of mediation and understanding. "'Translation', properly understood", Steiner continues to say,

> is a special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language. On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually […] In short: *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*.[26]

In effect, we learn by reading about the foreign and about our own historical past, and much of what we read is translation, in both the narrow and the broad sense of the word.

To put it simply, we educate ourselves through translation. That is why the German concept of *Bildung*, i.e., education or self-cultivation, was fundamentally related to the idea as well as the project of translation in the German Enlightenment and Romanticism. *Bildung* is the dialectic process of going beyond the limitation of the self to encounter and experience the foreign, and returning to a new self educated and enriched in that encounter and experience. Translation, or in German *Übersetzung*, the transferring of oneself to the position of the Other, is thus inherently part of the idea of *Bildung*. As Antoine Berman observes, *Bildung* is *"closely connected with the movement of translation* – for translation, indeed, starts from what is one's own, the same (the known, the quotidian, the familiar), in order to go towards the foreign, the other (the unknown, the miraculous, the *Unheimliche*), and, starting from this experience, *to return to its point of departure*".[27] Given its importance for education and cultivation, then, translation has always worked, though certainly with varying degrees of success in making it possible for us to know and understand what is distant from us in time and space, and in making communication possible among different linguistic and cultural communities.

And yet, we often hear claims and even fundamental arguments about linguistic and cultural untranslatability. Many writers and poets claim that translation is impossible. Cervantes has Don Quixote denigrating translation in a famous simile: "translating from one language into another, unless it be from one of those two queenly tongues, Greek and Latin, is like gazing at a Flemish tapestry with the wrong side out: even though the figures are visible, they are full of threads that obscure the view and are not bright and smooth as when seen from the other side."[28] But Don Quixote is a comic figure Cervantes loved to ridicule, and one can hardly take what he says as a sensible opinion representing the author's view. Many, especially poets, have indeed talked about untranslatability, and

[25] Op. cit., 30–31.
[26] Op. cit., 47.
[27] Antoine Berman: *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* [fr. 1984], trans. S. Heyvaert, Albany: SUNY Press, 1992, 46 [Emphasis in the original].
[28] Miguel de Cervantes: *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha* [span. 1605; 1615], trans. Samuel Putnam, New York: Viking Press, 1949, II.lxii, 923.

romantic poets infatuated with the ideas of uniqueness and originality are particularly prone to such views. Coleridge (1772–1834), for example, sees untranslatability as the hallmark of good poetry, for it is "the infallible test of a blameless style; namely; its *untranslatableness* in words of the same language without injury to the meaning".[29] Shelley also speaks of "the vanity of translation" in a well-known passage:

> Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.[30]

A famous remark – "Poetry is what gets lost in translation", – is attributed to Robert Frost, but Stanley Burnshaw argues that this remark is not meant to disparage the value of translation. The poet simply emphasizes the uniqueness of poetic expression and the impossibility of their replacement by any other words; thus Frost's remark should read, according to Burnshaw: "*The poetry of the original* is the poetry that gets lost from verse or prose in translation."[31] If we understand translation as transference and partial displacement of the original, we should have no problem agreeing with Frost's view, because having the original lost or displaced in another language is precisely what happens in translation. The displacement, however, generates its own effect, which can and should be equivalent to that of the original. But there are many other articulations of the idea of untranslatability, particularly of that of poetry. Emily Apter's book, *Against World Literature*, is a recent example.[32] Such claims of untranslatability, says Berman, "is perhaps an inevitable dialectical turning-back by which late Romanticism seeks to affirm in its way the absolute autonomy of poetry".[33] But the examples of Cervantes and Frost indicate that this view is not limited to romantic poets alone. The irony is, however, that claims of untranslatability, like many other kinds of claims and views, are often disseminated through translation; moreover, those who consider translation impossible often attempt at translation anyhow. Thus despite his overt pronouncement, Shelley, for example, did translate poetry, that of Homer, Dante, and Caldéron, into English. In the Chinese tradition, complaint about translation has also a long history. Kumarajiva, the great fifth-century translator of Buddhist sutras, famously compared translation to "feeding people with chewed-up rice". He was commenting on the unsatisfying, diluted meaning of complicated Buddhist concepts in Chinese translation, but Kumarajiva proceeded to translate nonetheless and made valuable contributions to the development of Buddhism in China by finding Chinese equivalents for original concepts in Sanskrit. Here is what we see often happened in history: in spite of all the talk of untranslatability, translators have always worked in quiet and self-effacing humility to help bring new ideas, concepts, theories, literary and artistic expressions, scientific and technological novelties from one

29 Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria* [1907], ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983 (Bollingen Series LXXV), 2:142.

30 Percy Bysshe Shelley: *A Defense of Poetry* [1821], in Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato*, 518.

31 Stanley Burnshaw: *Robert Frost Himself*, New York: George Braziller, 1986, 123.

32 See Emily Apter: *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability*, London/New York: Verso 2013.

33 Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 119.

culture to another. And in doing so, they help change the way we think and live and thereby making great contributions to the profound transformation of the world and its various cultures. Indeed, we cannot imagine the world as we know it without the benefit of translation.

In a narrow and restricted sense, we all know that certain words and expressions are untranslatable because what exists in the source language may not exist or may not have a close equivalent in the target language. Many idioms, puns, set phrases, jokes, and technical terms are in this sense untranslatable. In such cases, transliteration and loan words are useful ways to solve the problem. This is, however, not the unique problem in translation, because the growth of language has always been a case of catachresis, that is, a process of borrowing from the existing vocabulary to signify what is new and unnamed. When we say a "footnote", or "the eye of a needle", or "the head of the mountain", we are already using metaphors and translating an outside phenomenon into the language of our own body. This is true especially of abstract notions and concepts. As Vico observes, the "property of the human mind is that, when people can form no idea of distant and unfamiliar things, they judge them by what is present and familiar".[34] He further noticed "the fact that in all languages most expressions for inanimate objects employ metaphors derived from the human body and its parts, or from human senses and emotions".[35] This seems to be the common principle of etymology in all languages. In an ancient Chinese text, the appended words to the *Book of Changes*, we find a remarkably similar formulation of the same principle, where it is said that the ancient king Pao Xi invented hexagrams by observing the configurations of heaven and earth and by imitating the pattern of traces left by birds and animals on the ground. "By taking hints near at hand from his body and farther away from external things, he created hexagrams to make the virtue of gods comprehensible and the nature of all things known in signs."[36] That is to say, language and its vocabulary are largely metaphorical; they grow by borrowing from their own stock, as it were, by transferring the meaning of one word to another. Thus words are taken out on loan not only between languages, but within the same language as well.

If we recall the point made earlier in my discussion of the relationship between metaphor and translation, we may realize that the idea of untranslatability is largely based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of translation. To recapitulate, metaphor is only partial substitution and displacement, the saying of one thing by means of another, and so is translation. "A metaphor with the name A is B", as Lakoff and Turner point out, "is a mapping of part of the structure of our knowledge of source domain B onto target domain A."[37] Replace the word "domain" with "language", and we have a pretty good description of what happens in translation. If a metaphor is the mapping or transference of part of the structure of our knowledge of a source domain onto a target domain, translation is likewise the transference of part of the structure of a source language onto that

[34] Vico, *New Science*, 76.
[35] Op. cit., 159.
[36] *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (*The Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes*) [ca. 3,000 B.C.], 74b, in: *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經註疏 (*Thirteen Classics with Annotations*), ed. by Ruan Yuan 阮元, 2 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980, 1:86.
[37] Lakoff/Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 59.

of a target language. Just as we cannot demand total identity in a metaphorical expression, it would be pointless to require that translation produce an exact replica of the original.

In his famous essay, "The Task of a Translator", Walter Benjamin makes the statement that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original".[38] This is not to say that translation should not be true to the original or that free paraphrasing should pass as good translation. What this means is that translation is a re-creation of the original, an equivalent expression in the target language of what the original text says in the source language. Benjamin, however, is speaking on a metaphysical level rather than the level of technical considerations of translation as practice. Deeply rooted in Jewish mysticism as well as German philosophical idealism, Benjamin conceived of translation not as a mere rendering of an original foreign work, but as the attempt to articulate what no work in the original can articulate, what he calls the intention of all languages or the "pure language". As Berman comments, Benjamin's idea of the task of the translator

> would consist of a search, beyond the buzz of empirical languages, for the "pure language" which each language carries within itself as its messianic echo. Such an aim, which has nothing to do with the ethical aim, is rigorously metaphysical in the sense that it platonically searches a "truth" beyond natural languages. [39]

In Benjamin's own words, it is this mystical pure language that links all languages together. "Languages are not strangers to one another", says Benjamin, "but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express."[40] What all languages want to express is a deep intention,

> the intention underlying each language as a whole – an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. While all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, structure – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions.[41]

For Benjamin, then, it is into this pure language that the translator tries to translate, rather than trying to produce a likeness to the original. It is also in this pure language, almost as the Word of God, that he finds the absolute legitimacy of translatability. As he says: "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them."[42] In Benjamin's metaphysical conceptualization, then, translation becomes a creative or a re-creative act that brings out what is intended but not articulated in the original. In a passage that is highly poetical, he describes the translator's re-creation:

[38] Walter Benjamin: "The Task of the Translator" [germ. 1923], in: *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. by Hannah Arendt, London/Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1973 [1968], 73.
[39] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 7.
[40] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", 72.
[41] Op. cit., 74.
[42] Op. cit., 70.

> In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularly impressive manner, at least it points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages. The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation.[43]

This is a difficult passage, but here we may get at least two things clear out of Benjamin's highly metaphysical argument. One point is that texts are translatable despite all difficulties and actual cases of untranslatable words and sentences, because translatability is rooted in the very nature of all languages and their shared intentionality. The other point is that adequate translation preserves, paradoxically, "the element that does not lend itself to translation". To put the second point in plain language, we may say that the translator should not domesticate the foreignness of the foreign text, but to allow that foreignness coming through in the translation. "It is the task of the translator", says Benjamin, "to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work."[44] The translation is not judged by the original, but the "pure language" underlying the original, to be released in the translation.

We can better understand this paradox of translatability and the fundamental resistance to translation by going back to the idea of *Bildung* discussed earlier. If the concept of *Bildung* indicates an edifying process of self-cultivation, a process of going beyond the self to experience the foreign and to learn from that experience, then the foreign becomes valuable precisely at the point where it keeps its foreignness as an irreducibly different system, from which one can learn something new and valuable. Insofar as translation works, then, it should keep that irreducible foreignness of the foreign text intact, rather than reducing it to the domestic banality. As Berman argues, to overly domesticate a foreign text is the mark of bad translation: "A bad translation I call the translation which, generally under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work."[45] So here we have the dialectic quality of translation: what can be translated must at the same time be kept irreducibly foreign, but again, it is precisely the foreignness of a foreign work that calls for translation and makes a good translation possible. We educate ourselves as individuals and as cultures through translation, and it is the foreign, the new, the unfamiliar, or whatever we do not yet know and understand, that calls for translation in the first place. That is to say, we translate because we want to know something new and foreign, and it is therefore the task of the translator to retain the foreign concepts and values in the translated text even though linguistically the translator has already rendered the foreign language into our own. In effect, we are asking the translator to provide a text that can give us, even though in translation, an equivalent experience of directly encountering the foreign. This is the reason, as Northrop Frye puts it memorably, "why the humanists have always insisted that you don't learn to think wholly from one language: you learn to think better from linguistic conflict, from

[43] Op. cit., 75.
[44] Op. cit., 80.
[45] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 5.

bouncing one language off another".[46] It is in that sense and on that theoretical level that we learn to appreciate the value of translation as an experience of the foreign.

[46] Northrop Frye: *The Educated Imagination*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1963, 50.